New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1954

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Dear Charles"

DAILY NEWS

September 16, 1954

'Dear Charles' Is a Romp For Tallulah Bankhead

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Dear Charles" is quite a bit less than sensational as a French sex farce, but last evening Tallulah Bankhead turned up at the Morosco Theatre and gave it a good kicking around.

The lady was playing at the top of her form and voice, so this was an enjoyable starter for a new season in the legitimate theatre.

The theatre does remain legitimate, I hope. In "Dear Charles" almost nobody is. Miss Bankhead plays the role of a mother of two teen-age sons and a daughter who have been sired by three unwed gentlemen—a Briton, a Pole and an American. One must assume, because the locale is Paris, that Tallulah is French—a monumental assumption.

High Time To Wed

It is not until approximately 19 years after her first encounter with her first admirer that the heroine of the comedy worries about legitimizing the human results of her adventures. Up to now, Dear Charles has been spoken of as the father of all three. Dear Charles is a hack portrait painting that was picked up in a London shop for four pounds. But now—as of last evening at the Morosco, to be accurate—two of the children tell their mother they want to marry into a stuffy commercial family. Therefore, Mother decides that it is high time she got really married.

This farce, adapted by Alan Melville from a possibly Gallic original by Marc-Gilbert Sauvajon and Frederick Jackson, could have been written by Avery Hopwood and probably was. In it, Mother sends for her three old beaux, introduces them to their respective progeny and tries to decide which one she should now marry.

There are no surprises in this plot, but, since Tallulah is the heroine, there are enough surprises in the performance to make an enjoyable evening in the theatre.

Miss Bankhead is a thoroughly expert comedienne; she and Bert Lahr are the two best muggers in show business, and she wears prettier clothes. She can bellow one line and throw away the next in a whisper and make each sound funnier than it really is. She is dynamite.

The producers, Aldrich and Myers, have been thoughtful enough to give their star an affable company of playmates. These are, principally, Robert Coote as a standard Englishman, Werner Klemperer as a temperamental Pole, Hugh Reilly as a casual American and Fred Keating as one of those types who sit around drawing-rooms as disinterested friends of everybody else. One may also see, briefly, Alice Pearce as the matriarch of a French sardine family—I mean they deal in sardines.

Donald Oenslager's Parisian drawing-room is a tasteful bit of stage decorating, and a couple or three dresses by Gene Coffin look just fine on Miss Bankhead.

"DEAR CHARLES"

Comedy by Marc-Gilbert Sauvajon and Frederick Jackson, adapted by Alan Melville; staged by Edmund Baylies; setting by Donald Oenslager; Miss Bankhead's costumes by Gene Coffin; presented by Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers in association with Julius Fleischmann at the Morosco Theatre, September 15, 1954. The cast:

Martha.....Norah Howard
Walter.....Larry Robinson
Bruno.....Tom Raynor
Edward.....Fred Keating
Dolores.....Tallulah Bankhead
Martine.....Grace Raynor
Sir Michael Anstruther.....Robert Coote
Jan Letzaresco.....Werner Klemperer
Jeffrey.....Hugh Reilly
Madame Bouchemin.....Alice Pearce
Lucienne.....Mary Webster
Jean-Pierre.....Peter Pell

New York Post

September 16, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Tallulah Bankhead Comes to Town

Miss Bankhead, who has been known for many things but rarely for understatement in her theatrical tactics, has a tumultuous skill at making something out of nothing, and she may achieve the feat again in her latest vehicle, "Dear Charles," which opened last night at the Morosco.

She is looking extremely well these days, her vitality has certainly suffered no decline, and her electric quality is something that the stage needs in these quiet times. But, so far as I'm concerned, her new play is merely interesting in showing how well she can do in an obstacle race.

If you will forgive me for changing the subject momentarily from Miss Bankhead to myself, I'll remind you quickly that I'm sometimes accused of loving a play in London and then turning on it savagely when I see it in New York. Well, I saw "Dear Charles" in England, and I like it considerably more now, because Miss Bankhead wasn't in it in the West End and most decidedly is on Broadway. Nevertheless, it still seems to me a laborious, heavy-handed and mechanical farce, with an occasional comic line but an utter lack of humorous freshness.

The History

My impression is that the history of "Dear Charles" is more entertaining than its text. Originally, it was an American comedy by one Fred Jackson called "Slightly Scandalous," which was done here for some four performances during the war. There it might have rested, had not a French playwright named Marc-Gilbert Sauvajon come upon it and adapted it for Paris under the title of "Les Enfants d'Edouard." There Alan Melville, a British dramatist, saw it and re-adapted it into English as "Dear Charles." I doubt if it has improved in the process.

Perhaps it is time to tell you what it's about. It deals with a French authoress, whom Miss Bankhead wisely doesn't bother to make very Gallic, and her problem when two of her three children decide to marry and she feels called upon to tell them that their father is not the handsome fellow whose portrait hangs in her living room. Since she has never bothered about matrimony, they have three different fathers, an Englishman, a Pole and an American. Imperiously, she summons the trio to her home in the hope of picking out one to marry.

I suppose there is no dialogue less likely to be listened to than that in a Tallulah Bankhead vehicle when Miss Bankhead is waiting to make her first entrance or is pausing backstage for a moment before darting on again. It is just as well that there aren't many such moments in "Dear Charles." That is one of its virtues. Another is that it does have an occasional funny instant. On the whole, though, I don't think I'm being unfair to it when I say its humor emerges only when the star makes an ordinary line better by giving it her deepest tones.

It may be worth noting that there are some other people in the cast. In addition to the three children, there are Fred Keating as a tolerant friend, Hugh Reilly as the American, Robert Coote as the Briton and Werner Klemperer as the Pole. Incidentally, it is apparently intended to be pretty humorous when someone turns to the Pole and says approximately, "You're a Pole." Although I found little joy in it, it is conceivable that Miss Bankhead's one-woman show will turn "Dear Charles" into a hit. It's certainly a challenge to her.

Daily Mirror

September 16, 1954

Tallulah, Simply Dahling In 'Dear Charles'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Seldom have so many heavyweights been involved with a lightweight as in "Dear Charles," which launched the new Broadway season at the Morosco Theatre last evening. "Dear Charles" is an implausible, though sometimes enjoyable, farce adapted by Alan Melville from the original by Marc-Gibert Sauvajon and Frederick Jackson.

RICHARD ALDRICH and Richard Myers, in association with Julius Fleischmann, are its sponsors. The one and only Tallulah Bankhead is its bright, particular star. She is supported by a top-flight company, ably directed by Edmund Baylies. There is a tasteful setting by Donald Oenslager and a gorgeous Bankhead fashion show by Gene Coffin.

When her older son and daughter become engaged to the heirs to a sardine fortune, she summons the children's respective fathers to her Paris home to pick herself a husband to give an air of respectability to their alliances. She has to have someone to replace Dear Charles, who became their mythical parent when she bought a handsome portrait for four pounds in a London antique shop.

THE TRIO of fathers are all delighted with their offspring, but none seems to fill the bill. But there is a happy ending, in the Parisian manner. For the sardine matriarch had also met a man who thought marriage a little too conventional. It all adds up to a ribald joke about bastardy, a one-note joke which we found rather tiring and distasteful.

Miss Bankhead, as the doting but errant mother, acts with devastating authority. Her performance reminds one of a Heifetz or a Horowitz bestowing his genius on a pop trifle. The Bankhead fans rocked the Morosco's rafters with laughter and applause. We can only regret that our Tallulah didn't return to us in something more worthy of her talents.

Fred Keating works magic with the role of a family adviser. Robert Coote, Hugh Reilly and Werner Klemperer are first-rate as the contrasting sires. Coote, as a distinguished Britisher, etches a notably ingratiating portrait. And Reilly has an easy, likable manner.

OTHERS MERITING salutes for valiant service are Norah Howard, Larry Robinson, Tom Raynor, Grace Raynor, Alice Pearce, Mary Webster and Peter Pell. Miss Howard, one of our better actresses, unfortunately has too little to do as a crotchety maid. If we were looking for promising juveniles and ingenues, we most certainly could find them in the cast of "Dear Charles."

It is rather tragic, we think, that so much care and fine craftsmanship should have been wasted on such a powder-puff as "Dear Charles." We would have preferred to see this excellent company tackle a worthier vehicle, say Sheridan's "The School for Scandal" or Wilde's "Lady Windermere's Fan." What a Lady Teazle our Tallu would make!

Journal-American

September 16, 1954

Play Tribute To Tallulah

Small and Amusing Idea Weak as full three-acter

By JOHN McCLAIN

"DEAR CHARLES," which opened at the Morosco last night with Tallulah Bankhead starred, has had a long and devious career.

It was presented originally in New York some years ago with a notable absence of acceptance; it was thereafter translated into French and played to considerable success in Paris—sufficient, in fact, to prompt an Englishman to translate it back into his own tongue and take it to London, where it enjoyed a profitable run. Now it is back where it started, and if it becomes a hit it will be a tribute to one person only—Miss Bankhead.

For it is really not a good comedy. I have no idea what happened between New York-Paris-London-New York, but the fact remains that none of the various authors have been able to resolve a small and amusing idea into a finished three-act play.

The trouble with a show of this kind is that the original conception—the characters and a lot of what follows—is so intriguing that nobody will admit it can't be put together into a whale of an evening. But the fact seems to be that as a play it still fails to emerge larger than a minnow.

Basic Situation

The good basic situation is that of a middle-aged lady living happily with three illegitimate children who have been brought to 'teen age in the belief that their father is "Dear Charles," whose portrait hangs over the fireplace in the drawing room.

Then, because two of them announce at the same time that they wish to get married, the mother has to confess to their rather casual ancestry and decides, for reasons more convenient to the script than the audience, that she is having their fathers down for a visit. Each has a different father, and as for the portrait—she bought it in a small shop in Brighton for four pounds.

So far, pretty good. But once we have met the fathers and enjoyed a truly touching scene in which they are united with their children the proceedings hang in mid-air. There is some amusing banter but nothing goes anywhere, certainly not toward a very ingenious conclusion.

Runs Gamut

All this criticism, of course, without considering the indomitable talents of Tallulah. For she has apparently accepted her chores with the knowledge that the play is no great shakes but she'll give you your money's worth if it kills her—and it almost does, dahling.

She pulls out all the stops—high soprano, basso profundo—she resorts to long silences and moments of unintelligible chatter; she pushes her people around the stage like pawns; at one point she stares vacantly at the audience for several seconds when one of her confreres has left her with an unanswerable exit line. But she is never "off," because when she's not on stage, which is seldom, she's being talked about.

This begins to sound as if there's nobody else in the cast, and that is hardly true.

Three Lovers

Robert Coote, recalled as one of the Colonels in "The Loves of Three Colonels," manages to break through the Bankhead barrier for several memorable moments as her British lover, revealing himself once again as a skilled and reliant comedian; Werner Klemperer is highly amusing on his own as her Polish pianist, and Hugh Reilly does well within the limits of a less rewarding role as the American in her life.

But it's really all Miss Bankhead's show—it could just as well be called "An Evening with Tallulah." And it's my guess she'll get away with it.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
September 16, 1954

THEATER

'Dear Charles'

By WALTER F. KERR

Test Match

"DEAR CHARLES," the new showpiece at the Morosco, has had something less than a checkered career in this country. Written quite a few years ago by an American, it failed. Rewritten into French, retranslated into English, and reopened on the road here last season, it failed. The moral for this morning seems to be: if at first you don't succeed, try Tallulah.

Miss Bankhead has engaged in theatrical wrestling matches before. She has a fine record. She approaches this untidy and dust-laden script with her eyes narrowed, her fingernails painted, and her snarl aflame.

• • •

The first fall goes to the play. The curtain rises on a comedy maid dusting a picture on the wall. A family friend lounges around uttering balanced sentences that—you can tell from the construction—are meant to be epigrams. Various children rag one another in pink-cheeked gayety, to polite titters. The necessary facts of the play are conveyed by some one's reading an article out of a newspaper. The style is noticeably primitive.

But before long, and then without interruption, Tallulah is doing things. She is letting her lower lip hang down after a remark has dropped from it. She is clamping her jaw with the ferocity of a distressed bloodhound. She is touching a mantlepiece and caroming off it as though it were red-hot. She is making lines sound funny:

"I'm going to be married," announces one of her sons.

"Why? Aren't you happy with that girl?"

• • •

Well, it's nip and tuck all evening. The play starts to develop a chestnut of a plot about a lady writer who has had three children by three different men, has married none of them, and is now obliged to select one for the honor of the maturing children. Miss Bankhead lets out shattering blasts of unpredictable laughter, waves a handkerchief as she inhales and exhales, drops her eyelids with the thud of a suddenly released awning.

• • •

The play brings on the long-lost fathers of the children, suitors once more. It offers us a scene with a stuffy Englishman — beautifully played by Robert Coote—followed by a scene with a Polish composer who "soffers" — industriously but unrewardingly played by Werner Klemperer—followed by a scene with a mysterious chap who once spent a single night in her hotel room —mysteriously played by Hugh Reilly. The star is now twisting her fingers as she tilts with the wind, sitting bolt upright in an advanced state of shock, flapping about the room with her palms turned upward, and giving us the one-two-three with her teeth. (One is the lower lip pulled back to reveal fangs; two is the upper lip pulled awry to indicate dishonest graciousness; three is the whole works, glorious as bridgework and triumphant as art.)

• • •

The play has other resources. That comedy maid, for instance, rushes in armed with a kitchen utensil to protect her mistress. But by this time we are getting Bankhead in comfortable beige, Bankhead in dazzling red, Bankhead in sequins, Bankhead with flowers, Bankhead on a staircase, Bankhead enveloped in smoke.

• • •

I'd say that every single Bankheadism worked. I'd say that the star won an undivided, uncontested, thoroughly unrigged verdict. I'd say that the play was appalling for this day and age, but that it is difficult to remain honestly appalled while you are rapt in admiration.

A blithe spirit with a rusty voice is at work here. Hail to her.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun
September 16, 1954

Tallulah's Rep Gets In the Way of Role

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Tallulah Bankhead has devoted a great deal of time and talent to establishing herself in the world's mind as a first-rate heller, on the stage and in the home.

Her public has enjoyed this almost as much as she has. Now it seems the repute carries an obligation to be true to the well-known personality. That is all most of us want, but it does not sit so well in a vehicle known as "Dear Charles" at the Morosco.

The rambunctious star is heroine of a bit of fluff about a lady who has had three children and no husbands. In a pinch she has to tell the truth, and try to provide at least one father for the brood.

Since Tallulah, for real, and Tallulah, on stage, are all but inseparable, the picture of her desperate concern for appearances and propriety is more of a fantasy than the play is.

Trouble Sets In.

She looks slim as a whistle, is magnetic as the pole, and acts with more composure than she has in some years. Given a pallid line, she can roll her eyes, do a quadruple take, and growl out the words so the audience screams with delight. The trouble sets in when this same woman has to be taken seriously a few minutes later.

Having set out to produce a husband for herself, she summons the children's three fathers, none of whom she has seen in a couple of decades. Thus far the play develops by exposition, in what is practically a monolog of a first act.

The men arrive, are dismayed, then fight over Tallulah. In the end her solution is achieved by courage and luck.

A lot of this is outrageously funny. And a lot of it is just outrageous. Don't go with anybody who needs to have his jokes explained.

Miss Bankhead's supporting cast is for the most part suitable and mild. The children are attractive and the fathers are diverting, and none of them makes an indelible impression.

House Staff Better.

I found more pleasure in Norah Howard's tart housekeeper and Alice Pearce's deceptive matron, than in all Miss Bankhead's relatives, by marriage or otherwise.

As the old song said, "after all is said and done, there is really only one," that's Tallulah. She could make a lot less distinguished comedy than "Dear Charles" seem very funny. As it is she may play this one for years around the countryside. It is exploitable and so is she.

I wish her better luck. It doesn't really fit her any better than a hoop skirt or a suit of armor. And I don't believe she enjoys it nearly as much as she is good enough acress to pretend she does.

The New York Times

September 16, 1954

'Dear Charles' Arrives at the Morosco

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH the play is sluggish, the performance is brisk. The play is "Dear Charles," which opened at the Morosco last evening. The performance is largely Tallulah Bankhead.

Refreshed from more than five years' absence from the theatre, she has returned full of the old vitality and with her sense of humor intact. According to the program, she is playing the part of the unwed mother of three children, all of whom had different fathers. Her problem in middle life is to marry at least one of their fathers so that the children can marry respectably.

But if Miss Bankhead played anything except herself, audiences would be confused and disappointed, for she can give the average author a tussle for command of the stage. In "Dear Charles" she is an easy winner. Batting those big eyes with the long lashes, undulating around the furniture, grinning, roaring, putting saucy inflections into innocuous lines, she plays with gusto and wit, and the authority of a trouper. She presides over the play as if she were a fabulous hostess who is also the life of the party.

•

This is the French farce that began as a play in English. As "Slightly Scandalous" it failed in New York a decade ago. Transposed into French it had an enviable success in Paris. It then came to London in another adaptation in which Yvonne Arnaud, a plump diva with a squeaky voice, flourished for months.

No doubt there are simpler ways of putting a farce together. But this is a way that seems to work. For "Dear Charles" is impudent and naughty and pretty good fun for an evening on the town. When Miss Bankhead was acting in "Private Lives," she had more brilliant lines to put her husky voice into. But the situations in "Dear Charles" are entertaining, and now and then a good line comes over the footlights. "Marriage is a sort of friendship recognized by the police." That has the professional authority of good boulevard fooling.

•

Taking the words that a lot of play-smithies have finally managed to get on paper, Edmund Baylies has staged a gay and lively performance. Apart from the antics of the Bankhead, a number of intelligent actors put on a good show. As the old friend of the family, Fred Keating gives an amusingly saturnine performance that always seems to be a good deal keener than the lines.

Robert Coote, who once delighted the town as a Britisher in "The Love of Four Colonels," is wonderfully droll and ironically shy as Sir Michael, the first of the fathers. Werner Klemperer is also amusing as the temperamental Polish pianist who squired the second of the children. As the third father, an international confidence man who was outmaneuvered by the lady, Hugh Reilly plays with sound Irish-American charm.

•

Trust Alice Pearce to be grotesquely funny as a bourgeois French woman worried about respectability. And Norah Howard manages to lift the part of a crotchety maid out of the routine in which it is written. The startled children are amiably acted by Larry Robinson, Tom Raynor and Grace Raynor. As scene designer, Donald Oenslager has wrapped the whole package in elegance and grace.

It's a pot-boiling farce redeemed by the skill and high spirits of the performance. Everything always came obediently to a boil whenever the Bankhead started weaving her way through the scenery. It still does. When "Dear Charles" is disposed to drop back to a simmer she huffs and puffs and it boils again. Plays do what they are supposed to do when Tallulah is on the stage.

"Hayride"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

September 14, 1954

'Hayride' Features Fresh Talent

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Anybody who turns up at the 48th St. Theater to see "Hayride" is obviously a fan of hillbilly music and folk songs.

That's what he'll get, and that's what he'll get, with no fooling around and no letup. "Hayride" is not theatrical fare in any ordinary sense. It is a concert, casual and intimate, with no great effort to be visually interesting. Lots of the time you feel like a visitor in a radio studio, watching something that is chiefly intended to be heard.

The most attractive interludes of "Hayride" on a stage depend on personality rather than song. The charm of this music is innocent.

The performers who manage to remain least professional are by far the most winning. In the same way, the music is best when it is least arranged or jazzed up.

The show is presided over by a mighty pretty M.C. known as Sunshine Sue, who says "dainced" for danced, and "hayunds" for hands, and invites you to take your shoes off, right at the start. She sings a lovely song, too, including the night's most memorable ballad called "Blueberry Winter."

Some of her company are extremely well known in radio and recording circles, as evidenced by screaming fans who turned up for their premiere. Acts like Joe Maphis and Rose Lee and the Foggy Mountain Boys are extraordinarily talented. Established artists, they are solid value but less exciting than other players who will always be ingenuous and anxious.

The Coon Creek Girls are probably just as well known in their field as anybody else in this ballad fest, that has chanted its way up from Richmond, Va. They have sung for British royalty, and are Kentucky colonels in their own right.

Despite this success, there is a touching shyness about their singing, and an eagerness to be liked that reaches the heart.

There is a young man on the bill who, properly handled, might very well be as big as Sinatra or a Gabor. Zag the Ozark Mountain Boy is electrified by this music. His breezy delight and contagious grin are the ingredients of great, true charm.

Zag sings like someone possessed. He bounces to an odd off-beat of his own. He looks like an awkward toddler, consumed with excitement.

"Hayride" is a specialist's entertainment. It is pure country, from the word go, and scorns variety beyond its own style. It would fail to entrance a good many people beyond its first half hour, but the others, the enthusiasts, will yell for more far into the night.

"HAYRIDE"

Hillbilly folk musical; presented by Barron Howard and Jack Stone at the 48th Street Theatre, September 13, 1954, with the following cast: Sunshine Sue (Mary Arlene Higdon), Cousin Joe Maphis and Rose, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys, Paul Warren, Jack Tulloch, Curly Sechler, Coon Creek Girls (Lilly Mae, Rosie, Black Eyed Susan), Trail Blazers (Ray Smith, Roy Horton, Johnny Newton), Eddy (Texas) Smith, Quincy Snodgrass, Mary Klick, Zeb Robinson, Sonny Day, Fiddlin' Irving, Zag (Ozark Mountain Boy), Gene Jenkins and Jody Carver.

DAILY NEWS

September 14, 1954

'Hayride', a Hillbilly Music Show, Is Merely a Juke Box With People

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Last evening as I left the 48th St. theatre and looked up and down the block (which is between 6th and 7th Aves.) I felt it was quite a pity that the city had posted so many No Parking signs and had even assigned a cop on a horse to prevent vehicles from so much as hesitating. For here, on this block, "Hayride" had opened, and this show is a natural for the burly fellows who drive tractors and trailers along the nation's highways and have to stop somewhere to pick up a toothpick. "Hayride" is a juke box with people. Maybe I could have stood it with a cup of coffee and a hamburger, but without these comforts I was in fairly desperate straits last night.

The program says "Hayride" is a hillbilly folk musical. It also says that such people as Cousin Joe Maphis and Rose, Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs, the Foggy Mountain boys and the Coon Creek Girls are participants in the entertainment. The program must be right, because I saw and heard all these people and more (Quincy Snodgrass and Fiddlin' Irving, for instance). Indeed, I saw and heard more than I could stand.

Folksy Folk Musical

"Hayride" comes from an eight-year run in Richmond, Va. It is made up of people who don't sing so good and don't play so good but are folksy as all hell in their hillbilly costumes. They pluck guitars, scratch fiddles, twang bass viols, plink banjos, strain accordions and yowl their native songs.

I am going to have to wait until Wednesday evening for the official opening of the new theatrical season, when a reasonably housebroke hillbilly named Tallulah Bankhead appears in a play titled "Dear Charles." "Hayride" merely aroused the damyankee in me. But, as a dutiful reporter, I must state that last night's audience sounded enthusiastic. About six people, so far as I could detect, cheered and whistled at every number as though it was the greatest thing since man first learned how to make a musical instrument out of a cat's intestines. From where I sat I couldn't see who these six people were, but I bet they all wore Confederate uniforms.

New York Post

September 14, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Hillbillies Open the Season

As our first official assignment of the new season, we learned drama critics, erudite students of the art of Shakespeare, Sophocles, Ibsen and Chekhov, were called to sit in judgment on a hillbilly revue. It is named "Hayride," it arrived at the 48th St. Theater last night after extensive triumphs in the South, and its cast includes performers folksily known as Sunshine Sue, Cousin Joe Maphis, Lester Flatt, the Foggy Mountain Boys, the Coon Creek Girls, Black Eyed Susan, Fiddlin' Irving and Zag, the Ozark Mountain Boy. Oddly, I didn't mind it at all.

It is said by those who know far more about such things than I do that mountain music and its hillbilly performers have quite a vogue in New York. Not that its celebrities are frequently seen in person but that their records sell enormously, and their names are cherished by lovers of folk music. And, while last night's audience failed to include some of the most persistent of first-nighters, the attending playgoers, particularly those in the balcony and at the back of the orchestra, seemed knowingly happy in the presence of Sunshine Sue and company.

Finding an Audience

I have considerable doubt whether the local newspaper Aristotles should have been invited to the festivities, since our tastes, despite the best will in the world, are inclined to be urban and comparatively sophisticated. But if, as seems entirely possible, "Hayride" should find its particular New York audience and catch on at the box office, I would be pleased and only mildly astonished. My own impression is that an entire evening of hillbilly music and general folksiness is slightly excessive, but, even to me, the show has its points.

For one important thing, the performers turned out to be remarkably engaging. Although professionally bucolic and just a trifle bent on demonstrating their aforesaid folksiness, they were, on the whole, restrained and modest in displaying their rural virtues. There seemed nothing at all fraudulent or ostentatious in their air of being country boys and girls alone in the big city, and their unpretentious naturalness struck me as extremely disarming. I think it is to their credit that I found myself liking them more and more as the show went on.

The Talent

A second virtue is that there are some talented people among them. Liking a hillbilly show appears to depend in great part on getting used to it, and this may be the reason why I thought the second half of "Hayride" was considerably better than the first. By that time I had come to notice that several of the company could handle their musical instruments with considerable skill, that others knew how to put over their songs with dexterity and showmanship, and that an unaffected desire to please brightened the work of all of them. I even enjoyed a song that contained the names of a lot of vegetables.

I'm afraid that I'm not altogether sure as to the identity of some of the company, but I believe the names of a few I liked are Cousin Joe Maphis, who played a number of instruments; Mary Klick, a pleasant-looking slim girl who sang a song about a fat woman; Lester Flatt, who knows how to handle a mandolin, and the fellow who bills himself as Zag, the Mountain Boy. And Sunshine Sue, who introduces the proceedings, was never too coy about it. I sincerely hope New York likes them.

Daily Mirror

September 14, 1954

'Hayride,' Hillbilly Musical, Bows at the 48th St. Theatre

By PHILIP STRASSBERG

The 1954-55 Broadway theatrical season got off to an inauspicious start Monday evening when "Hayride," a hillbilly musical established itself at the 48th St. Theatre.

ITS RUN, HOWEVER, will depend on the number of folk and hillbilly fans there are around.

The country style music is presented in the same format as the radio show in Richmond, Va., from which most of the performers were mustered. But we'd like to know how a refugee from the Borscht Belt sneaked in to appear with the aggregation playing the harmonica. We know him as a mouth organist-comedian, who plays club dates in the Catskills.

Barron Howard and Jack Stone, who are presenting this musical melange, probably thought they had a good idea. But the several nodding heads and the raucous laughter — though we couldn't tell whether it was for 'em or agin 'em— refutes that possibility.

Not that these grass-roots troubadors aren't talented. There's Sunshine Sue, who is an amiable emcee and delivers a song in handsome style. Zag, the Ozark Mountain Boy, came in for his share of applause with his zig-zagging while singing. He reminds us of a "country style Johnnie Ray."

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GENE JENKINS, electric guitarist, is an excellent musician who is also blessed with handsome features. Sonny Day does justice to the "Stomach Steinway."

Cousin Joe Maphis and Rose, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys, the Coon Creek Girls, the Trail Blazers, Eddy (Texas) Smith, Quicky Snodgrass, Mary Klick, Zeb Robinson, Fiddlin' Irving and Jody Garver are others of the hillbilly troupe who delighted the balcony section fans and who did their best to stir up interest.

It was only when familiar numbers like "Jambelaya" and a medley of Stephen Foster tunes were presented that the sophisticates in the audience stirred, if ever so slightly.

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WE WERE disappointed mainly because we expected a story line. It might then have proved more entertaining to the blase first nighters.

There always has, and always will be, a place in the musical scheme of things for hillbilly presentations. We're afraid, though, that "Hayride" isn't ready for Broadway. Or, perhaps, Broadway isn't ready for the "Hayride" type.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

September 14, 1954

THEATER

'Hayride'

By WALTER F. KERR

Corn Ball

ARISTOTLE once said that a certain kind of entertainment was supposed to fill the audience with pity and terror. Can be have been thinking of "Hayride"?

At the 48th Street last evening a passel of young'uns was a-pickin' and a-singin', and a bunch of us old ones was a-settin' and a-shudderin'.

There, right up on the stage, was a lass named Sunshine Sue. (I understand she isn't really the original Sunshine Sue, but I am not going to investigate further.) She was urging us all to kick off our shoes and feel "right to home" and thanking us for "spankin' our hands like that."

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There, too, was a sad-lookin' feller with one tooth blacked out, a wrinkled derby, and a tie hangin' down to his ankles. He wasn't the only funny one, though. 'Nother feller, whose name I never did get straight—was he Quincy Snodgrass or Zeb Robinson?—took to windin' up the other singers when they were singin', takin' their bows for 'em, and sometimes making an out-loud joke. ("I wanted to come to New York the worst way—so I did, on one of them Bloodhound Busses.")

Elsewhere, against a harvest moon painted by some one who seems to have got his early training doing covers for pulp magazines, were an endless variety of red-checked shirts, fringed jackets, calico aprons, and tilted Stetsons — swayin' away to th' music. (There are going to be no more swayin's or singin's in this review; I'm through with it.)

I haven't the least doubt in the world that the reasonably modest and always energetic folk who are bent on bringing hillbilly music to Broadway really do come from the places Sunshine Sue says they come from. I believe the Coon Creek Girls—Lily May, Rosie, and Black Eyed Susan—really do come from Coon Creek. I'm sure Zag the Ozark Boy once saw an Ozark, that Eddy (Texas) Smith is actually from (Texas), that Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs are true-blue Foggy Mountain boys.

I also believe that the properties for the entertainment came from Tootsie Metcalf's barn.

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What I don't believe is that any one of them has been back in quite a spell. They've been somewhere else in the meantime, and if the program note didn't say that they'd been doing Saturday night shows for a radio station, I'd have guessed it right off.

I'd have guessed it from those electric guitars—apparently a part of our rural electrification program—that twang away so steadily and so insistently and so deafeningly all night. I'd have guessed it from Sunshine Sue's dialect, a syrupy confection I don't so much associate with the hill country as with a recommendation that you go buy tooth-paste quick. I'd have guessed it from that thrumming slap-and-snap syncopation that makes every old folk tune—and some recent improvisations as well—sound exactly alike.

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The best things about the evening are a pretty girl named Mary Klick and—I hate to admit it—the erratic and unselfconscious footwork of Zag the Mountain Boy. The crushers of the evening are the violent things this synthetic and strident style can do to such genuine treasures as "The Blue Tail Fly," "He's Gone Away" (here given in one of the least attractive of its variants) and even the once indestructible, now patently destructible, "Old Macdonald Had a Farm."

Not that I ever expected to enjoy "Old Macdonald Had a Farm." I just didn't expect to see the old place razed before my eyes.